

RUSSIAN-SERBIAN RELATIONS – CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

В последние 17 лет внешняя и оборонная политика Сербии радикально обратилась к ЕС и НАТО. Несмотря на это каждое новое прозападное правительство старалось поддерживать хорошие отношения как с Россией, так и с Китаем. Учитывая преобладающее положительное отношение народов Сербии к России, отказ от традиционно дружественных российско-сербских отношений вовсе не был правильным выбором проевропейской политической элиты страны, что произошло после «5-й Октябрьской революции» в Сербии 2000-го года. Дается анализ состояния экономики Сербии, а также её внешней политики и политики национальной безопасности в начале 2017 г. для того, чтобы понять те решения, которые принимаются сербскими политическими лидерами в настоящее время в отношении ЕС, НАТО и России. При проведении анализа использовались не только последние статистические данные, но также материалы, полученные из сербских (региональных) СМИ, что позволило получить более содержательные сведения в области политического и экономического развития страны. Сделан краткий исторический обзор становления сербского государства и российско-сербских отношений, начиная с XIX до начала XX в. Поэтому для того, чтобы помочь читателю понять современные российско-сербские отношения, представлен исторический контекст формирования тех связей и отношений, которые имеют место между Россией и Сербией. Авторы в основном пользовались сербской и англоязычной литературой, мало представленной в Российской Федерации.

Ключевые слова:

Балканы, ЕС, НАТО, политика, Россия, Сербия, Югославия.

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© Alimov Andrew Alekseevich – PhD, Associated Professor, Saint Petersburg State University, St. Petersburg; e-mail: alimovandrey@yandex.ru

© Filipović Aleksa – master, Saint Petersburg State University, Serbia; e-mail: alimovandrey@yandex.ru

Russian-Serbian relations were always an interesting topic for research, especially for the Western scholars. Trying to understand why this small Balkan nation behaves in its foreign policy as it does, is not easy to comprehend at the first glance. Because of its close proximity to Central European countries such as Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Southern European countries such as Italy, it can be expected out of Serbia to fully embrace European Union values and point of view. Nevertheless, almost 19 years after the war with NATO, and numerous changes of governments since 2000, Serbia continues to balance between EU, USA and Russia, trying to preserve its identity and historical connections it shares with countries to the East.

Before exploring current relations between Russia and Serbia and their historical roots, a brief overview of Serbian economic and political situation will be presented, along with the relations that Serbia currently has with EU, USA and NATO. It is necessary to fully understand the geo-political sur-

rounding that Serbia finds itself in, in order for Russian-Serbian relation to be placed in appropriate context.

Located on the crossroads of the South-Eastern Europe, Serbia is landlocked country in the center of the Balkans, with population of around 7 million. After the break-up of Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia in 1992, Serbia became a part of Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1992–2003), and later, State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (2003–2006). In 2006, Serbia became independent republic, parting ways with Montenegro.

Republic of Serbia today is facing many challenges, economic, political and military in nature. Civil war in Yugoslavia, international sanctions, NATO aggression, period of rapid privatization of state property and series of weak coalition governments, contributed to the overall degradation of Serbian economy and standard of living.

In 2017, GDP of Serbia was USD 41.43 billion and its GDP per capita was USD 15.200,

32 | with agriculture sector consisting of 9.8%, industry sector 41.1% and services 49.1% of GDP [15; 72]. During the first half of 2018, Serbia exported USD 9725 million of goods and imported USD 12751 million, resulting in a negative trade balance of USD 3026 million [51, p. 47]. Real GDP growth of Serbia in 2017 was 1.9%, which was among smallest growth in the region compared to the GDP growth of Albania (3.8%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (3.0%), and Montenegro (2.8%) [88, p. 9]. Public debt in 2017 reached 61.50% of Serbia's GDP, further restricting development of economy [73]. Average wage in Serbia in first half of 2018 was EUR 415, making it among lowest in the region, although high number of population works for the minimal wage, which for the same period was set to EUR 220 [62; 69]. The official at-risk-of-poverty (AROP, or the share of population living under 60 percent of median income) is estimated to be 24.5%, or around 1.8 million people [60, p. 5]. In addition, 750.000 citizens of Serbia are living in extreme poverty while every second citizen under the age of 25 is unemployed [61].

Weak economy, high unemployment and low average salary are all factors that contribute to one more pressing issue for Serbia – human capital flight. For a period of 2005–2014, there was a constant of 31.000 of young emigrants per year, while the numbers spiked in 2014 (57.000 emigrants) and in 2015 (60.000 emigrants) [61]. Official data show that by 2016, total number of Serbian emigrants for the last 10 years is around 600.000, while 90.000 of them are having a higher education [59]. This amount of unrestricted human capital flight is putting heavy strain on Serbia's under-developed economy, and it will be a pressing problem in decades to come, as the emigration process show no sign of stagnation, with a tendency to grow further in the following years [26].

Political landscape of Serbia is dominated by center-right Serbian Progressive Party (Српска Напредна Странка – СНС) and it is de facto lead by ex-prime minister and current president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić (Александар Вучич). In 2016, Serbian Progressive Party won 48.25% of the votes (from the 56% turnout), continuing to be strongest political party in Serbia since 2012 [14, p. 2].

Second largest party in Serbia is center-left Socialist Party of Serbia (Социјалистичка Партија Србије – СПС), led by current minister of foreign affairs, Ivica Dačić (Ивица Дачич). In 2016 Serbian parliamentary elections, it won 10.95% of votes. [14, p. 2]. Other parties that can be placed under "opposition parties" umbrella, are far right Serbian Radical Party (Српска Радикална Странка – СРС), centrist "Enough is Enough" (Доста Је Било), center-left Democratic Party (Демократска Странка – ДС) and right-winged Dveri (Двери) [14, p. 2].

Current Serbian government is made of coalition of SPP-SPS and some other smaller political parties, such as Social Democratic Party of Serbia, Movement of Socialists, Party of United Pensioners of Serbia and Serbian National Party. Current president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, served previously as a Minister of Information (1998–2000), Minister of Defense (2012–2013) and Prime Minister (2014–2017) [17]. Since 2001, Serbia had 9 coalition governments, while 4 of them were established in the period of 2012–2017. In December 2017, Minister of Foreign Affairs Ivica Dačić stated that new parliament elections could be held in 2018, further exposing political instability in Serbia [28].

In the sphere of international relations, Serbia is facing multiple challenges. First and foremost is status of its southern province of Kosovo and Метохија (Косово и Метохија), which declared unilateral independence in 2008 without referendum, but with the support of USA and majority of EU countries [45; 46]. After the NATO aggression of Federative Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999, and Kumanovo Peace Treaty, Serbian security forces left the province, with NATO forces in the shape of KFOR ("Kosovo Force"), UNMIK ("United Nations Mission in Kosovo") and EULEX ("European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo") acting as a new military and police agencies [85].

In March 2004, during the full presence of 20.000 members of international forces in Kosovo, ethnic Albanian population initiated a pogrom of ethnic Serbian population. 4,012 Serbs were driven from their homes, more than 900 houses belonging to Serbs, Romas and other minorities were set on fire, six towns and ten villages were ethnically

cleaned, while 35 Serbian Orthodox churches and monasteries from medieval times were destroyed and desecrated [12].

Nevertheless, Kosovo is today recognized as an independent state by 112 members of the United Nations, and 23 members of the European Union. Countries that are not recognizing Kosovo independence, besides Serbia, include Russia, China, and India, majority of African and South American countries, as well as Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania, and Greece as EU member states. Regardless, it is clear that nothing short of full recognition from Serbian side will be enough as a final step for Serbia to join the European Union [34; 71].

In 2009, Serbian leadership defined their foreign policy priorities as “four pillars” – the EU, the USA, Russia and China [56, p. 17]. While China is currently present in Serbia with over one billion US dollars’ worth of investments in infrastructure projects and factories (with the indication that they will rise to over USD 4 billion in the near future), it does not have such impact on local politics for now as USA, EU or Russia [36]. Nevertheless, for the first time in modern history of Serbia, China is currently under serious consideration to become supplier of the armed UAVs for the Serbian military, along with the short and medium-ranged anti-aircraft artillery systems and armored vehicles, by the end of 2018 [37; 58; 83].

United States are still one of the key players in the Balkan region. The NATO aggression on Bosnia in 1995 and Yugoslavia in 1999 were spearheaded by the American forces. Dayton Peace Agreement that ended civil war in Bosnia was signed in United States, while the Croatian forces that ethnically cleansed 220.000 of Serbs when they overran the Serb-inhabited territory of Republic of Serbian Krajina (Република Српска Крајина) during the “Operation Storm” in 1995 were trained and backed by the U.S. [18].

The United States military base on Kosovo, “Camp Bondsteel”, was established shortly after the war near the city of Угољевац (Урошевац), and it is considered second largest U.S. military base in Europe [25]. Besides being strongpoint of United States armed forces in South-Eastern Europe, it also served as a CIA “black site” for holding suspected

terrorists, with the knowledge of leading EU member states [27]. Given that Kosovo and Metohija is mineral rich area, and that just the deposits of the lignite coal are estimated to be around 14.7 billion metric tons (besides other mineral resources), it is understandable why United States opted for permanent military presence and creation of the Albanian client state, besides the obvious geo-strategic position [13, p. 24.4].

The United States’ influence in Serbia can also be felt through the financial donations directed through the organizations such as USAID, which for the period of 2001 to 2013 amounted to around USD 865 million [76, p. 21]. United States also support various NGOs in the country, with U.S. embassy in Belgrade donating various grants to local NGOs every year [29]. The United States and Serbia established a degree of military cooperation, such as IMET (International Military Education and Training Program), State Partnership Program with Ohio, and military exercises between United States and Serbian military [50; 75].

The United States are adamant in their position towards Serbia – it needs to cut almost all ties with Russia and to “normalize” relations with “Republic of Kosovo”, meaning recognizing its southern province as an independent state. During the previous year, this stance was repeated often by the former Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, Hoyt Brian Yee, during his visits to the Balkan countries [40]. He qualified Serbian foreign policy as “sitting on two chairs”, and that if Serbia wishes to join the EU, it needs to make serious distance from Russia, as it cannot keep the current policy of having a good relations with it [44; 81]. During the recent talks between Serbian government and the representatives of the self-proclaimed “Republic of Kosovo” about possible solution of the frozen conflict that would include “territorial exchange”, the United States decided to support this idea, although it is strongly opposed by Germany.

In late August 2018, John Bolton, the US national security advisor, stated that “if Kosovo and Serbia reach an agreement that is satisfactory to both of them, I think that we (US) would unquestionably support them” [23]. This was followed by acting Deputy As-

34 | sistant Secretary of State of the United States of America, Matthew Palmer, who in September stated that «it is increasingly clear that Russia's vision of its strategic goals on the Western Balkans are built around distrusts, disorder and opposition to this (EU/NATO) integration.» and that «if Pristina and Belgrade are able to reach an agreement on full normalization of the relationship, that will reduce the influence that Moscow has with Serbia» [24]. These unusually direct messages from U.S. officials are an obvious challenge to Serbian leadership, which will probably be forced to choose between the two sides sooner than later, mirroring the situation that Ukraine was facing in the late 2013.

NATO and NATO membership is also one of the issues that Serbia is facing since the change of the government in 2001. NATO aggression on Yugoslavia in 1999 is still fresh in memory among the population of Serbia, and as the results of poll conducted in 2018 show, only 10% of citizens are in support of NATO membership, with 84% against it [20]. With Montenegro being the latest country to join the NATO in June 2017, and Macedonia being next in line [84], Serbia will find itself almost totally surrounded by NATO member states. Although Serbia's NATO membership is not expected anytime soon, Serbia is already cooperating with NATO on many levels. This cooperation includes Serbian membership in Partnership for Peace programme (PfP), Individual Partnership Programme (IPP), NATO's Military Liaison Office in Belgrade, Science for Peace and Security (SPS) and numerous military exercises between Serbian military and NATO forces [31; 54]. Only a few days before commemorating 16 years of NATO aggression on Yugoslavia, Serbian government signed Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) agreement with NATO, granting their forces diplomatic immunity and freedom of transit throughout whole territory of Serbia, among other things [53]. Given the low support for NATO membership among the population of Serbia, it is not likely that Serbian leadership will make such decision, at least as long as Serbia is outside the EU. Nevertheless, cooperation on such level with NATO will continue, and Serbia will maintain regular exercises with NATO and U.S. forces. It can be

argued that Serbian politicians succumbed to a pressure coming from the West, although it can be also said that it is just the tactic that Serbia employs, and that is to keep balancing between various sides, not fully committing itself to any of them.

Regarding European Union, every Serbian government from 2000 onwards proclaimed that a priority goal for Serbia is to join the EU. In 2008, Serbian government signed Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the European Union and applied for EU membership in 2009. The European Council passed a decision to grant Serbia the candidate status for EU membership in 2012, while in 2013 it decided to open the accession negotiations with the Republic of Serbia. Out of 35 chapters needed for EU ascension, Serbia opened 12 chapters and closed 2, with 2025 mentioned as earliest potential date for Serbian membership [33; 70; 77].

One of the reasons that Serbian leadership is pushing the agenda of the EU membership is that the EU funds provide large assistance to the country, with over EUR 3 billion granted to Serbian governments for period of 2000–2015 [32]. The EU is also funding various projects in Serbia, varying from educational to infrastructural ones, and the EU officials are often trying to highlight that they are the largest financial donors to Serbia [35; 38, pp. 4–7]. Nevertheless, in a poll conducted in 2016, support for the EU membership among the Serbian citizens was at 47%, while in poll conducted among the students of prestigious University of Belgrade in 2017, 39.7% of young future professionals were against EU membership, with just 28.9% in support of it [19; 21].

Like with the United States position towards Serbia, the country's membership in the European Union means cutting ties with Russia, as the EU would demand from Serbian leadership to align country's foreign and security policy with that of the Brussels [39]. Head of the European Union Delegation to Serbia, Sem Fabrizi, stated in December 2017 that considering Serbia's trade relations with Russia “it is not possible to play by your own rules if you are part of something” and that Serbia has to “normalize relations with Prilьtina” before becoming member of the EU [4].

Increased calls from both EU and U.S. officials for Serbia to cut ties with Russia are getting stronger in the last few years, mainly because Serbia didn't introduce the sanctions to Russia, as the EU did. In addition, Russia and Serbia cooperate on the economic, political, cultural and military level, as both countries share close historic ties between each other. Any Serbian government has too much to lose if the demands of EU and U.S. are fulfilled, and ties with Russia were to be cut.

Serbia signed Free trade agreement with Russia in 2000, and it is the only European country which has this kind of relationship with Russia, besides some members of CIS. During the 2017, Serbian companies agreed new export arrangements of cheese, meat, fresh fruits, and vegetables worth over EUR 7 million, with total Serbian export amounting to USD 379.2 million, which is a growth of 18.1% relative to last year [22]. That the trade between two countries is growing, data from 2nd quarter of 2017 show – Russia exported to Serbia USD 192 million and imported USD 278 million of goods, which is increase from 2nd quarter of 2016 up for 20.62% for export and 25.50% for import [66]. Although the trade volume between two countries is not so much high, it is steadily increasing during the last few years. In addition, Serbia is landlocked country, and it is a logistical challenge to deliver fresh fruits, vegetables, meat and cheese to Russia, and therefore, a lot of investments in infrastructure needs to be made. Nevertheless, Serbia recognizes the importance of Free trade agreement with Russia, and a chance it presents for the agriculture sector of the country. It is then not surprising that Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić stated that Serbia will not introduce sanctions towards Russia, during his visit to Moscow in December 2017 [87].

At the start of 2009, Serbia and Russia signed an agreement with Gazprom Neft for control of the Serbian oil monopoly and the right to route a major European gas pipeline through Serbian territory [78]. The company in question was Oil Industry of Serbia (NIS), and by 2017, it became one of the most successful corporations in Serbia [8]. The plan to integrate NIS with Gazprom Neft was initiated in expectation of South Stream gas

pipeline project [47]. Serbia was positioned to be a participant in it, as a transit route between Bulgaria and Hungary. It was believed that South Stream will boost integration and economic processes in the region, attracting over EUR 1.5 billion of direct investments to Serbia and creating more than 2.5 thousand jobs for the construction period [79]. The cancellation of the project was a major setback for Serbia's energy security, although in December 2017, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced that Moscow and Belgrade are exploring an opportunity of connecting Serbia to the Turkish Stream gas pipeline, since other Russian energy companies are also working successfully on the Serbian market [52]. If Serbian participation in Turkish Stream project is realized, it would provide much needed financial boost to Serbian economy, while securing the energy demands for industry sector and households. Besides energy sector, infrastructure projects are also on the agenda. Russian Railways showed interest in acquiring European railway operators, including those from Serbia. This means that Russian Railways is not only taking part in railway reconstruction projects, but also looking for opportunities to manage rail infrastructure in Serbia [67].

Serbian government relies on Russia to represent its interests in the United Nations, mainly through the support of Serbia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, thus far blocking any attempts for Kosovo to become member of UN, and becoming fully-recognized independent state. In addition, in 2015, Russia vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution that would have condemned the Srebrenica massacre, conducted by Bosnian Serb forces, as genocide, thus marking whole ethnic Serbian population in Bosnia as "genocidal" [57]. This resolution, if adopted, could have created additional tensions in already dysfunctional Bosnian state, and potentially provoke another round of ethnic-based violence between Bosnian Serbs, Muslims and Croats. Recognizing importance of Russian indolent in the United Nations, Russia's late UN envoy Vitaly Churkin (Виталий Иванович Чуркин) was posthumously given the Order of the Serbian Flag 1st Class, with Serbian president stating that "it was thanks to Churkin that the Serbs

36 | had not been labeled as a genocidal nation” and that “the Serbian people will remember Mr. Churkin as a person who struggled for justice in Kosovo and also in Bosnia-Herzegovina” [68]. During the recent voting in the UN, where the Kiev’s Crimea resolution was on the agenda, Serbia sided with Russia and voted against it. Previously, in November 2017, Ukrainian ambassador to Serbia made several insulting statements towards Russia, such as those that “Russia is using Serbia to destroy Europe.” and that “Russian propaganda and its secret services had played a huge role in attracting Serbian and other foreign mercenaries to Ukraine” [89; 90]. In response, Serbia withdrew its ambassador from Kiev, while Serbian Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that Ukrainian ambassador was “going too far in using our hospitality” [74].

The cooperation of Russia and Serbia is not just economic and political one. In 2012, the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center was established on the basis of the Cooperation Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Serbia in order to provide humanitarian emergency response in Serbia and other Balkan states. During the major floods in 2014, rescuers of Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations (МЧС – EMERCOM) were the first to come to help Serbia making 335 flights to the flooded areas, evacuating more than 2000 persons and rendering more than 140 tons of relief supplies to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina [64]. Nevertheless, EU and USA are marking this humanitarian center as Russia’s “spy outpost” and “Russian military base” in Serbia [30; 43]. This unfounded accusations are going so far, that Serbian government is being openly threatened with consequences by the West if Russian EMERCOM personnel are granted diplomatic immunity, same one as NATO personnel has after the IPAP agreement was signed [86].

Military cooperation between Russia and Serbia is in constant development, even though U.S. and EU are calling for Belgrade to cut such ties with Russian Federation. For now, Belgrade seems indifferent to such pressure, as two regular exercises were established in 2015 – “Slavic Brotherhood”, where military special forces from Russia,

Belorussia and Serbia cooperate together in anti-terrorist drills, and BARS (Brotherhood of Aviators of Russia and Serbia), which is exclusively air force exercise between Russian and Serbian aircraft pilots [49; 65]. In addition, for the first time, Serbia dispatched a contingent of its military forces to the major CSTO exercise (“Indestructible Brotherhood 2017”), held on September 2017 [42]. This event was marked as a milestone in Serbian-Eurasian relations, as Serbia has observer status in this organization.

Though possessing military industry of its own (legacy of former Yugoslavia), Serbia is interested in acquiring Russian military hardware, especially aircrafts, helicopters and anti-air defense systems. At the end of 2017, Serbia received 6 MiG-29 fighter jets as a donation from Russia, with 30 battle tanks and 30 armored vehicles more, which will be delivered in 2018 [80]. Serbia is set to buy additional 3 Mil Mi-17 transport helicopters and 4 Mil Mi-35 gunships (export version of Mil Mi-24 assault gunship) for its aging helicopter fleet, thus increasing the capabilities of its air-mobile forces, while the purchase of additional MiG-29s, S-300 long range AA system, Pantsir-S1 short/medium range AA system and BUK air defense missile system is being actively negotiated [41; 48; 82].

It is clear that Serbia is looking to re-arm itself after the war with NATO in 1999, where majority of air force and anti-aircraft defense systems were damaged or destroyed by bombings. While the anti-aircraft systems that Serbia wishes to acquire are purely defensive in nature, officials in U.S. and EU are angry that Serbia is ignoring their demands for reducing the military cooperation with Russia. At the end of December 2017, United States Congress informed United States Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, that detailed list has to be created of Russian weapons, military equipment and technology purchased or given to the every country of Balkans, along with the detailed report about any military exercise held by those countries with Russia since 2012 [16]. Although other Balkan countries have aged Soviet equipment in their arsenals, spotlight here is clearly directed towards the Serbia, as the only country that has open military cooperation with Russian Federation. Therefore, additional pressure from

the West can be expected towards Serbia, although the current government doesn't show any signs that they are seriously considering limiting such cooperation.

On the question why the sentiment in Serbia is so prevalingly pro-Russian among the people, even though the country itself is open wide to the Western influence in every sphere of life, one has to go beyond simple economic/political/military cooperation. Cultural and religious ties that bind Russia and Serbia are rooted deep in history, and Russia is making its presence felt through various cultural activities and manifestations across the country. To understand where this connection between Russia and Serbia actually comes from, we need to be reminded of some historical facts and events that united this two countries during some of the most trying times in their history.

Serbs themselves, as a people, originated from the lands of today's Ukraine and Russia. Slavic tribes settled the Balkans in the 6th and 7th century, with Serbian tribe being among them. [16, pp. 109–124]. As Russians themselves, they received Orthodox Christianity from the Byzantine Empire in 9th century, which along with the lack of language barriers helped in maintaining connection between two Slavic people separated by vast distance. [6, pp. 141–169]. Serbian medieval kingdom and later empire was considered one of the mightiest in the region, at one time having access to three seas at the same time – Adriatic Sea, Ionian Sea and the Aegean Sea. [6, pp. 496–573]. Unfortunately, in 14th century, infighting between nobility spelled the end of once mighty realm as Ottoman invaders overwhelmed Balkans and started the period collectively known among Serbian people as “500 years of Turkish occupation” [6, pp. 593–602].

Modern history of Serbian state begins with the 19th century, when the revolutionist sentiment among enslaved Serbians fuelled two large uprisings against the Ottoman rule on the Balkans, collectively known as a “Serbian Revolution”. Although First Serbian Uprising (1804–1814) failed in liberation of occupied lands, it was significant period for Serbian-Russian relations, as first diplomatic representative of Russia, Konstantin Konstatinovich Rodofinikin (Константин

Константинович Родофиникин) came to Serbia, as well as Russian volunteering units under command of general Isaev (Иван Иванович Исаев) [7, p. 45]. Fame of Serbian efforts became famous in the Russian Empire, and even Pushkin himself dedicated poems about Serbian uprising and history of Balkan Slavs [9]. Second Serbian Uprising in 1815 proved to be more successful, as partial autonomy of Serbia was secured, and Serbian Principality was formally recognized by Ottoman Empire, with the active role of Russian Empire [3, pp. 536–537, 584–585, 724–725]. Thanks to the Russian intercession, with the conclusion of Treaty of Adrianopolis in 1829, Serbia's autonomy was recognized by Ottoman Empire and in 1838, Ottoman Empire, with close supervision and participation of the Russian Empire, brought to power new constitution in Principality of Serbia. [1; 11, pp. 344–346]. At the same year, first consulates were opening in the country, such as Russian, English and French. The first Russian consul and permanent diplomatic representative of Russia in the Principality of Serbia was Gerasim Vasilyevich Vashchenko (Герасим Васи́евич Ва́шченко), while the Russian scholars were also responsible for opening schools and educational institutions [2].

In the following years, Russian Empire helped Serbian Principality to establish itself as a sovereign country, which was finally achieved in 1878, during the Congress of Berlin, while Serbia was proclaimed kingdom again in 1882, some 600 years after it was first proclaimed in 1217. Besides the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), where Serbia and her allies, with the support of Russia, liberated almost all South-Eastern Europe from Ottoman forces, the highest moment of intercession of Russian Empire for preserving freedom and independence of Serbia and Serbian people came when Tsar Nicolai II declared war against Austro-Hungarian and German Empire as a move against their aggression towards Kingdom of Serbia. Along with forcing France and England to save the retreating Serbian army and civilians in 1915, Tsar Nicolai II became a symbol of sacrifice and brotherhood in the eyes of the Serbian people, an image that is saved until this day [5].

In turn, Serbia, first as a part of Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians and later, Kingdom of Yugoslavia, accepted large number of White emigration, fleeing the civil war in Russia. During the period of 1918–1920, Russian emigration came in two waves. The first one consisted of aristocracy and commanding core of Russian army, which integrated to Yugoslavian army, while the second wave consisted of cultural and technical intelligentsia, which left in Russia grand research projects, libraries, laboratories and scientific institutes [10, p. 10]. Russian emigration was granted all the financial and material help that still recovering kingdom could offer, and Russian-Serbian Gymnasium in Belgrade was considered as largest Russian educational institution in emigration. In 1921, population of Belgrade was 111.700 residents, while at the same time hosting more than 30.000 Russian emigrants [10, pp. 12–15]. In the coming decades, Serbian and Russian cultures and families mixed, as both people felt closeness in spirit and mentality between each other. Russian artists, scientists, researches, professors, architects, engineers and doctors gave a new life to a struggling kingdom. Such was connection with Serbian Orthodox nation that even Baron Pyotr Nikolayevich Wrangel (Петр Николаевич Врангель) decided that his final resting place should be in this Balkan country, which is to this day located in the small Russian Church of Holy Trinity in the city center of Belgrade [10, p. 242].

Serbia is one of the few countries left in Europe that treats Soviet Red Army as true liberators from fascist forces, and not as occupying force, as it could be heard in recent years from some members of the EU. During 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin was guest of honor during the military parade in Belgrade, and in 2016, Immortal Regiment procession was organized for the first time in Belgrade, in cooperation of Serbian government and Russian embassy [55; 63]. It is obvious that link between two Slavic nations is still strong, and it is a factor that counts in both countries foreign policy.

The mutual anti-Russian interests of the EU and the United States can be seen in their treatment of Serbia's decision to take middle road between West and the East, while

not completely accepting Euro-Atlantic integrations. As a small country with emerging economy and internal political problems, Serbia lacks decisive leadership to make radical decisions that would push Serbia to either side, and instead current government is opting for the middle-of-the-road approach. Unfortunately, with increased pressure coming from the EU and especially the USA for Serbia to make choice, this becomes increasingly difficult position to maintain. Neither solution is looking promising for now. If Serbia decides to absolutely dedicate to the Euro-Atlantic integrations, it clearly loses a lot. Free trade agreement with Russia will be broken, military and political cooperation will be disbanded and Serbian leadership would face a lot of dissent and opposition from majority of people who are supporting Russia more than the EU, thus perhaps provoking the same situation Ukraine found itself in. If, on the other hand, Serbia breaks off its pursue for EU membership, and turns to Russia for protection, that would also be difficult to handle, as Russia, with the Montenegro's ascension to NATO, lost direct access to landlocked Serbia. There is not possibility to transport neither material nor troops to Serbia without provoking NATO member states that are surrounding it. Land, air and shipping routes are closed-off for Russian army, and short of declaring war on NATO, Russia has no options how to help out Serbia, or preserve its sovereignty as it did for its Syrian ally. In addition, difficult economic situation that Russia is facing means that it wouldn't be able to financially support Serbia who would most likely face international sanctions, or worse. Therefore, Serbian leadership is presented with two options that are equally difficult and complex. Faced with weak economy, unstable political situation and pressure from all sides, it will most likely continue to do what it was doing so far – conducting “multiple chairs” foreign policy while trying to prolong inevitable moment when final decision needs to be made. Or perhaps, a political climate in Europe will change sooner than later, and Russia will again emerge strong enough to defend its interests and allies in its historical sphere of influence, such is Balkan Peninsula.

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